

CutBank

Volume 1
Issue 20 *CutBank* 20

Article 5

Spring 1983

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Recommended Citation

Hugo, Richard (1983) "Salt Water Story," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 20 , Article 5.

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SALT WATER STORY

Richard Hugo

He loved his cabin: there
nothing had happened. Then his friends were dead.
The new neighbors had different ways.
Days came heavy with regret.
He studied sea charts and charted
sea lanes out. He calculated times
to ride the tide rip, times to go ashore and rest.
He memorized the names of bays: those
with plenty of driftwood for fire,
those with oysters. He found a forest
he could draw back into
when the Coast Guard came looking, news
of him missing by now broadcast statewide.
He made no move. He turned out lights
and lit candles and watched his face
in the window glow red.

He dreamed a raft
and dreamed this sea lane out, past
long dormant cannons and the pale hermit
who begged to go with him. A blue heron
trailed him. A second heron trailed the first,
a third the second, and so on. Those who looked for him
checked the skies for a long blue line
of laboring wings.
The birds broke formation, and the world
of search and rescue lost track of his wake.
His face glowed red on the glass.
If found, he'd declare himself pro cloud
and pro wind and anti flat-hot days.

Then he dreamed wrong
what we owe Egypt, what we owe
sea-lanes out of the slaves to ourselves
we become one morning, nothing
for us in dawn, and nothing for us in tide.

What we owe Egypt fades
into what we owe Greece and then Rome.
What we owe Rome keeps repeating
like what we owe time—namely, our lives
and whatever laughter we find to pass on.
He knew grief repeats on its own.

One night, late, the face in the window
glowed back at him pale. He believed that face
some bum peeking in
and waved “Hi.” The old face told him,
to navigate a lasting way out
he must learn how coins gleam
one way through water, how bones of dead fish
gleam another, and he must learn both gleams
and dive deep. He learned both gleams
and learned to dive fast and come up slow
as sky every day.

And we might think someday we’ll find him
dead over his charts, the waterways out
a failed dream. Nothing like that.
His cabin stands empty and he
sails the straits. We often see him
from shore or the deck of a ferry.
We can’t tell him by craft. Some days
he passes by on a yacht, some days a tug.
He’s young and, captain or deckhand,
he is the one who waves.